

Open Letter to Chestnut Ridge Residents

As concerned residents of this Village, we take this opportunity to express our personal feelings to you, our fellow Village residents, regarding recent events. We trust you will read this letter with an open mind and heart.

We all know the facts on the ground: The demographic in Chestnut Ridge has begun to shift during the past several years and continues to shift. Younger families are replacing older families. Many of these young families are Orthodox Jews. Village residents are concerned about a change to the character of the neighborhood. We would not expect otherwise—you care about your neighborhood, as is to be expected.

All the same, we believe it is important for you to be aware that some of your fellow residents are peddling misinformation, fear mongering, and, yes, even outright lies, to attempt to convince you to oppose the proposed zoning amendments.

To be candid, we must admit that we were dismayed—shocked—by the approach taken on June 28 by the opponents of the zoning amendments. The fear mongering, verbal abuse, and outright hateful speech voiced by some at the public hearing (publicly and privately) was offensive and disheartening. Although those engaging in fear mongering and hateful speech constituted a small fraction of the attendees (in fact, many of these were not even Chestnut Ridge residents), the general tenor left much to be desired.

To these verbal attacks we will respond with facts and reason:

- **Concern raised: This amendment will lead to overdevelopment and high density housing as has become the norm in some sections of Ramapo.**

- **Fact:** The 1,500 residents that requested the Village adopt the proposed amendments all moved out to the scenic suburb of Chestnut Ridge in order to reside in a spacious and beautiful environment not overcrowded with bottlenecks, as is the case in various neighborhoods they migrated from. They desire beautiful lawns, quiet streets, and a safe environment. All these residents are, to our knowledge, in full agreement that the quality of life in Chestnut Ridge should be maintained at all costs.

Note that the proposed zoning law amendments for Places of Worship were drafted in part based on the “Wesley Hills model”—in a manner suitable for Chestnut Ridge. The Wesley Hills concept has proven that houses of worship can be accommodated while still preserving the character of this beautiful neighborhood.

- **Concern raised: This amendment will cause the price of our homes to plummet, as has been the case wherever Orthodox Jews moved into neighborhoods.**

- **Fact:** This is an egregious lie propagated by opponents of Orthodox Jewish migration. A simple internet search reveals the exact opposite. In several Chestnut Ridge neighborhoods, for example, the price of the average home rose considerably over the past ten years (in the vicinity of 50%), likely due to Orthodox migration. Those who claim otherwise are simply misleading the public.

- **Concern raised: This amendment is not truly necessary, as Orthodox Jews have no need for additional synagogues.**

- **Fact:** Under the current zoning law, not a *single legal synagogue in all of Chestnut Ridge* has been built since the Village was founded in 1986, despite 1,500 religious Jews moving into the Village in recent years, due to the insurmountable hurdles faced when they attempted to comply with the law. The current law—which requires 5 acres to build a house of worship, among other cumbersome requirements—is outdated and outmoded. It certainly does not conform with the needs of the Orthodox community members—who, under age-old tradition, simply cannot travel by car to attend synagogue on the Sabbath.

The fact remains that a population of 1,500 people who take their religion and prayer very seriously—most of whom pray several times weekly and even daily—is, on a practical level, currently legally barred from operating a synagogue. ***This, to be blunt, is a travesty.***

- **Concern raised: The amendment was drafted without input from anyone other than the Orthodox Jewish community, and ignores the needs of non-Orthodox Jewish residents.**

- **Fact:** Much planning went into the formulation of the zoning amendment, most of which was focused on alleviating concerns raised regarding quality of life. The Village board and planner raised many concerns regarding various aspects of the proposed amendments, and many of these concerns are reflected in the final version of the zoning amendments. Further, the Village is open to input from all residents of any faith or background. The claim that the amendments neglect quality-of-life concerns is simply false.

Moreover, we understand that residents may have valid concerns regarding specific details of the proposed amendments. Indeed, we would **expect** some give-and-take regarding items of concern. Such is the nature of the democratic process. It is not, however, the nature of the democratic process to shut down (shout down) the needs of a community entirely.

- **Concern Raised: This amendment violates the 1st Amendment's Establishment Clause by giving preferential treatment to one religious community.**

- **Fact:** This amendment is actually **required** under federal law. The law, RLUIPA, passed unanimously in 2000, prohibits a municipality from placing a substantial burden on the exercise of religion through zoning law unless a strict test can be passed (called "strict scrutiny"). The current zoning law, which does not practically allow for synagogues for the vast majority of the Village's 1,500 Orthodox practitioners, surely qualifies as a substantial burden.

The Establishment Clause charge is spurious, and those that raise it are ignorant of constitutional law. In 2005, the Supreme Court (in *Cutter v. Wilkinson*) explicitly rejected the argument that by giving religious people greater rights than their secular counterparts, RLUIPA unconstitutionally advances religion. *Permitting* a faith community to practice its religion does not constitute *establishment* of that religion.

- **Concern raised: 90% of the Village will have its character and quality of life radically altered if the zoning amendments are passed. In fact, almost every single residence will convert into a synagogue!**

- **Fact:** This fear-mongering claim is being thrown around by a group that refuses to acknowledge the need for **some** change in the Village. Anyone that gives this argument just a little bit of thought will realize just how baseless it really is. First, Orthodox Jews require a quorum of ten people at a minimum. Second, the typical Orthodox Jewish synagogue has many scores of members if not a hundred or more. So the claim that all houses—or even a significant minority of them—will become synagogues is ludicrous.

Can the Village put a quota on the number of synagogues in a given area? Such an explicit restriction would likely violate federal law. Nonetheless, the fact remains that, even without a quota, these structures will still represent only a small percentage of dwellings within the Village.

- **Concern Raised: All of the above is true, the amendment will not directly hurt our quality of life. However, it's a slippery slope; if we don't fight this, then the Orthodox Jews will take over the Village and destroy our quality of life.**

- **Fact:** Those who raise this concern have it exactly backwards. If Village residents fight the migration of Orthodox Jews through opposition to the zoning amendments and other means, they likely won't prevent Orthodox Jews from moving to the area. Based on recent home sale data, Orthodox Jews will continue to move into Chestnut Ridge in large numbers and, through the democratic process, will play an ever-greater role in shaping the laws and character of Chestnut Ridge as per their lifestyle.

If, however, Village residents work with the Village and the Orthodox community to enact this common-sense zoning amendment and, in general, to get along with their new neighbors, it is hoped that we will all live in harmony in a Village that fits the needs of all its residents.

Sincerely,

Menachem Brickman / Raphael Bondi / Yossi Lichtenstein / Evi Nakdimen / Bentzion Retter / Boruch Steinharter / and Zahava Wiener, *on behalf of*

Concerned Residents of Chestnut Ridge